

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 23
Number 2 *anti-*

Article 27

Spring 5-1-2003

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Brian VandenBos
College of DuPage

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Recommended Citation

VandenBos, Brian (2003) "Or So I've Heard," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 23 : No. 2 , Article 27.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol23/iss2/27>

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Or So I've Heard

-Brian VandenBos-

The window of Rhonda's grandparent's ground-floor guest room was half open. Rhonda stood there hugging her skinny frame as gusts of cold chill drifted in. She zippered her bright red hooded sweatshirt and placed her right leg through the open window and onto the grass outside. Closing the window behind her, she nearly lost her footing on the dew-soaked front lawn, briefly floundering like someone drowning in water. The moon was a waning crescent spotlight, illuminating the trees of the forest ahead, bringing its celebrity into sharp focus. The birds that crooned in the daytime had retreated into slumber. A milky white rabbit skipped across the street and into a nearby bush. Rhonda clicked on her tiny plastic flashlight and crossed the threshold of the woods.

Rhonda knew the way and never questioned the direction her feet took her. The forest was far from treacherous and she found herself admiring the wind as it howled and wafted through the branches amongst her, bring about a strong aroma of pine. After twenty minutes of sauntering through the fresh evening, she caught sight of the fence of the Shelton Zoo.

"Psst."

Rhonda stopped dead in her tracks.

"Psst. I'm over here."

Rhonda crooked her head to the left. From the shadows came a young girl with scrunched shoulders and a smile on her face.

"Oh, it's just you," Rhonda sighed with great relief. "What were you pretendin' to be some kinda creature of the night, somethin'?"

"No, do I sound like one?" the girl asked, still grinning.

"No, but you sure enough look like one."

The girls giggled at the joke. The quickly quieted themselves, however, realizing how loud they were.

The air gave a piercing shriek, bringing forth a wind that belatedly slapped the girls' small bones.

"Just kidding, Meg," Rhonda added with a sincere whisper. "Just kidding."

The fence was taller than both girls but not tall enough to be out of reach. Rhonda grabbed up high, pulled herself up, and sat onto

the top of the fence. As she sat, she shook the fence with her hands and butt, causing a light rattle.

"Sturdy. Come on up."

Megan followed suit and was soon sitting next to Rhonda.

"Okay. On the count of three, we jump. Okay, ready? One, two—"

"—Hey! I was just beginnin' to like it up here! Jeez!" Meg exclaimed, her body a little tipsy from lack of balance.

At that remark Rhonda swiftly jumped down onto the zoo grounds. Her sneakers hitting the pavement sounded like the slap of a wet towel. She looked up at her companion. Meg returned Rhonda's glance and leapt forward.

"I guess there's no turning back now," she said in a dour voice after landing.

"I guess," Rhonda replied.

They stood motionless, gazing at the expanse ahead of them. It was a fairly large zoo, with rows of big, cage-like enclosures and several buildings, a barn included. They had come in from the very opposite end of the front entrance, what would be considered the back of the zoo. Scattered moonlight lay on the surface of a small pond directly ahead of them. There were no ducks in it. Both girls wondered in their heads where the ducks were. Asleep probably.

Rhonda and Megan walked around the mucky rim of the pool. Their shoes made slurping sounds and, on a couple of occasions, the soles nearly got stuck. Finally, they reached the foot of a curvilinear wooden bridge. They walked on it solemnly, leaving goops of mud in their tracks. The bridge creaked intermittently with their light steps.

"This place is so quiet at night," Megan observed.

Rhonda nodded her head in agreement without taking her eyes off of looking straight ahead. Megan was half right; there was an unusual calmness in the air around them, like a veil that softly covers a bride's head. Yet in the distance, presumably originating from the woods, one could distinguish the sound of crickets. Also, Rhonda thought she had heard the rev of a car engine, but she was probably mistaken, it being such an early hour and all.

"Let's go this way," Rhonda suggested, extending her arm to point at a fenced enclosure next to a large barn.

The two walked off the bridge, their feet taking them onto a crushed limestone walkway. They reached a gate and peered inside.

"Are there any animals in there?" Megan inquired.

The blackness of the night made it difficult for the girls to see anything ahead. Unexpectedly, something rose from right in front of

their feet. Both girls jumped at once, as if the movement were choreographed, and backed away slightly. From the ground arose a massive horse, at least twice the size of the girls. It gazed at them unmoving with the exception to the wagging wisp of its tale. After slight hesitation, the girls approached the creature and began to stroke its strong, coarse nose.

Rhonda and Megan spoke in hushed, comforting whispers to their newfound friend: "Good girl;" "did we wake you up?" "Are you cold?" "Yes, you're a good girl, yes you are." They soon broke from this reverie of reassurance and returned to their course of action.

"They sure looked sad yesterday," Rhonda affirmed. "Yeah," Megan agreed, her mouth staying open as if to verbally complete her thought.

"Do you think they're still sad?" Megan inquired, her voice being somewhat shaky.

They both look to the horse for an answer. The animal remained inert, with the exception of its tail, which was still swaying in the dark. It's glassy eyes held secrets that no one would ever know.

"Yeah, they're sad. I'm sad too - looking at 'em," Rhonda answered.

Flies circled the horse, sporadically landing on various parts of the mare's body, only to fly off again.

"We, um...do, um...um, what do we do, Rhon?" Megan asked.

"We do this," Rhonda announced a, with a sad, sideways grin on her face.

She unlatched the gate and slowly spread the door wide open. Megan grabbed a handful of hay from a nearby pile and placed it strategically in front of the horse's face. Walking carefully backward, she led the animal from its pen and began to head towards the front entrance of the zoo.

* * *

Meanwhile, at a bookstore across town, police officer Jimmy Scott was sitting at a small table crying. His large frame slouched over a fresh paperback. The book smelled like a shiny action figure fresh out of it's package. Officer Scott simply sat there in silence, all hunched and boy-like, softly weeping. No tears hit the pages of the book, something that would've surely been a great dramatic effect. He slowly closed the book and refused to lift his hand from the cover. The book was Matilda; it's author was Roald Dahl. Officer Scott cleared his throat

and looked longingly at a spot on the far side of the small table. He gently pushed the book to that spot and stood up, wiping the saline moisture from his cheek.

* * *

"Have you ever wondered about the universe?" asked Frank Anderson, a well-built 18-year old with a neck the width of Montana.

Frank was lying on his back in a Volvo station wagon. Beside him was a tanned young woman named Denise Gordon. She wore a lot of face paint and jewelry.

"You mean like the stars and stuff?" Denise retorted.

Naturally they were looking at the night sky, speckled with white and blue points that were probably stars, but it was hard to tell through the orange defroster lines on the back window.

"No, Jesus Christ. I mean, well, that too. It's just that...I mean what about what happens on earth? That's the universe. The meaning of life? Devil, It's like everything. It hurts my head to think about it, ya know?"

They laid there a few moments in silence, the wind rusting against the Volvo and chilling their fingertips. Denise heard what Frank said, but she couldn't help but thinking about the stars being the universe.

"I sure like to look at them stars, Frank" she said, stretching her back from it's uncomfortable position.

A jet airplane leisurely trudged its way across the sky. It let out a grumble as it passed by their sight line, as if saying "hello."

* * *

"Hello, Mr. Pig" said Rhonda Carlos, in a voice mimicking a female villain in a James Bond movie.

Rhonda and Megan were standing in a pen opposite a pink swine that was lying in the far, dark corner.

"Boy, these guys sure look dirtier up close than they do from far away," Megan observed.

The pig awoke and shuffled towards the girls, letting out a few grunts in the process. The girls proceeded to lead the pig out of its pen and into the hallway of the barn, in which a llama, two sheep, and calf were standing, each looking dumbfounded. Rhonda and Megan had nearly emptied half of the barn from its pens.

"Grab a handful of hay Rhon," Megan declared, suddenly wanting to take over the job of being leader.

Rhonda obliged and the two instigated a temptation of the animals by reaching out with their hands full of hay and walking backwards out of the barn. The sheep were quick to come and in no time the other animals followed suit. The girls realized almost simultaneously that they didn't have enough hay to go around, just as the first sheep began eating from Megan's hand.

"Oh, wow...oh, wow. Rhon? This isn't good. Rhon!? This isn't good. What do we do?" Megan cried, quickening her pace.

"Run!" Rhonda screamed

* * *

As he reached for his radio, Officer Scott made the keen observation that his belt was wrapped over a pant loop of which it should've gone under. He looked around to see if anyone in the bookstore noticed his blunder. From his radio unintelligible hiss suddenly emanated and he turned down the volume with a swift tap of the finger. With this disturbance, Officer Scott felt the need to vacate the establishment and left his book on the obscenely small table. It was not until he walked outside and the cold air hit him that he realized he was currently on duty.

"Fudge."

Officer Scott slid awkwardly into his pallid squad car, accidentally hitting a distress switch with his wrist on the way in. A deafening burst of siren blared then abruptly ceased.

"Fudge."

As he drove off he found his lips quaking, desperately in need of a cigarette between their fleshy folds. Smoking wasn't allowed on the job. At least he thought so. He was pretty sure so. In any case, it's not something one look into. Nicotine gum was his vice now, nevertheless. Popping the sallow square into his mouth, Officer Scott bit down like he meant it. "That'll teach those lips to shake."

* * *

"Ugh, Frank, ugh. I hate this one," Denise squealed, swinging her lean arms like a warrior.

She was in the back of the Volvo. Although the rear seats were down for optimal laying, her feet were still scrunched from lack of

room. Frank was lounged in the driver's seat and had just changed the station on the radio. It was a song by the Beatles and Frank amplified the volume considerably.

"If you don't turn off that goddamn..." Denise spat, trailing off.

Frank obliged and turned off the radio all together, swinging himself into the back of the car.

He situated himself so his elbow was on the floor and the side of his head rested on the palm of his hand.

"Ringo doesn't do it for you, eh?" he inquired, looking at her and beaming.

Denise maintained her vacant stare as if she hadn't heard the question. Then, as if lightning had struck her, she unexpectedly became animated.

"Yeah, heh...No, you know that's not it. You knew I'm still mad 'bout you blowin' off your little sis' today."

Frank uttered something indistinguishable that clearly conveyed annoyance.

"Well, honey, gosh...I forgot all about it. Honest. Jeez. You know, who cares about some grammar school band performance anyway? Not like they play any good."

Frank suddenly increased the volume of his voice, sounding both angry and hurt.

"Not like my parents, our parents, pay any mind. I mean, why should I be any different?"

Denise bit her lip to signal that her thinking process was in action. Then, after carefully formulating a suitable answer in her mind, she spoke with deliberate enunciation.

"Rhonda cares about you Frankie...she, she loves you. Just the least you could do is love her back. Just the least you could do."

Frank took in a lungful of air and swallowed silently, hoping to clear his throat without Denise hearing. He shifted his brawny frame and lay on his back, his hands behind his head. The car shook and Frank looked over at Denise, who had just let out a shiver and was clenching her body. Sitting up, he slid out of his ashen hooded sweatshirt and hung it in front of Denise's face. She gazed at the garment, as if contemplating its fabric features. Small cyclones of leaves were being formed in the meadow beside the Volvo. The sky was becoming increasingly overcast. Denise softly grasped the sweatshirt. The cold, metal zipper gently skimmed the tip of her nose like the pendulum of a clock. She lifted up her back and dressed herself in it, letting out a low whimper as she coiled herself into the shape of the letter "c."

* * *

The sheep were closing in and the girls felt as weak as the delicate dolls that lined their shelves at home. They were halfway to the front gate when Megan dropped her bundle of hay, turned from jogging backward, and ran as if she were escaping a menacing sibling trying to push her off a pier into frigid water. Rhonda slowed her pace dramatically, letting out a sigh, as the sheep stopped in their tracks to sniff the fallen hay. She glanced over at Megan, who had also slowed from not wanting to run into the horse they had left at the front gate. Some of the other animals were coming towards Rhonda, but at a measured and non-threatening speed. Consequently, she began to walk backward at her original pace towards the front, soon catching up to Megan, who was fraught with her hands on her knees.

"Run!" Megan laughed, mocking Rhonda's hysteria earlier. Megan positioned herself beside Rhonda and matched her backwards velocity.

The horse was standing aloof at the gate. When the girls reached him, trailed by a motley crew of animals, the horse began to trot in place nervously. Neither Rhonda nor Megan noticed, and they briefly smiled at one another, realizing that they had reached the gate and were mere moments away from what they had come to do.

"Y'ready?" Rhonda implored, looking half eager, half petrified.

Megan didn't reply. However, since she didn't express any opposition to the question, Rhonda felt that she could commence with her plan. She reached her arm around the horse's coarse neck and moved down a green, rusted latch. Unexpectedly, Megan appeared from behind Rhonda and, in a gracious motion, gave the door a light push. It swung open with ease and the horse immediately loped through the entry like a jet's flame.

That sucker was a stallion after all.

* * *

Officer Scott had been assigned to radar patrol that evening, so he pulled into a little cove of asphalt behind a row of dark hedge bushes. Some may call it a "speed trap." He called it traffic enforcement. That's not to say that he took the task seriously, which would be far from the truth. In fact, this evening he was working on a novel, writing freehand in a notebook on the steering wheel. Every so often he would glance at the radar when a car seemed to flutter by exceptionally fast, but after a half hour of sitting still, and writing, he had yet to pull over

a single vehicle.

He began his session by reading over his efforts from the previous day, which had the heading "Take Me Someplace Nice":

The sun and the clouds and the moon shown in windows of black and red and green. The sky was purple and the roses were crimson. Jonny had an eight ball to tell time. Corn had been regurgitated through his system and was now coming in streams. The fellow hit and ran and never returned to the scene of the accident. People were pleased with his performance and they never spoke of the place again. One thing I remember were the trails the tribulations and the fear - the fear, the fear, the fear, seeping through my swollen feet. One time my father almost died from hiccupping, his chest heaving with each subsequent breath. Except he couldn't breath. That was the problem. And the desk we sold was in good shape except the markings you put on it. Drawings of boys with mutt chop sideburns and ears pierced ten times. And our printouts of secret places to find in streams of cake moss, pretend lovers in heaven. Most of all they called him "Frisco." Learning I'd say. The robbers lost the bet, so they were going to get the hotdogs that evening. Please, don't leave me.

Officer Scott seemed pleased with the entry and began to write on the next page, ignoring the blue ruled lines. He gripped the charcoal sketcher's pencil with his whole fist and put great power into his strokes, almost tearing the paper. The letters were big, capital, and assured:

GOODBYE, TONIGHT,
GOODBYE ALRIGHT

* * *

Denise has been asleep for some time when a noise from outside of Frank's Volvo caused her to come around. Her sitting up awoke Frank.

"What's up snuggles?" he inquired with eyes indicating a state of half-snooze.

"I just thought I heard somethin' outside."

Denise jolted her body upright: "Wait- see that?"

She was pointing to a spot in the distance in which something large was moving away from them.

"Yeah, what is that...a...a...that's a human, somethin'?"

Denise squinted hard and pressed her face to the window.

"Frank, that's an animal, gotta be, look at it! Got four legs!"

Indeed it had four legs. Indeed it was an animal.

Just at that moment, something flew past the back of the Volvo. Frank and Denise both let out a startled breath. It was a llama, large and trotting at a considerable speed. It was white with blotches of brown, its ears sticking up as it raced away.

"What the devil was that?" Frank screamed in an incredulous pitch.

"It was like some big goat-horse somethin'," Denise answered. "Man, what in the hell's that doin' here?"

Frank didn't answer. He had gotten out of the car to chase the beast.

* * *

The sky was a bright, bright morning red as the sun ascended to its daytime realm of blue. Officer Scott, who had written three tickets in the last hour, was pulling out of his location of traffic enforcement. At this hour the streets were abandoned like soggy, rumpled socks on a locker room floor. Officer Scott was rubbing the sleep out of his eye as he headed towards the police department.

"Sarge too stupid notice I was napping...too stupid notice I write no tickets," he thought through deep yawns.

Passing by Milton Street, something strange fixed itself in the corner of Officer Scott's vision. He caught the sight too late to make out exactly what it was, but it intrigued him enough to do a u-turn and head back. The road was his, considering there was no traffic whatsoever, so performing this maneuver was a cinch. Officer Scott cranked his wheels towards Milton: in the middle of the road, halfway down the block, was a sheep. Its dirty white body did not retreat from the road, but rather stared him down as if challenging the squad car to a dual.

Officer Scott rubbed his eyes once more, for that's what they did in the movies when incredulous things happened. Realizing that the animal before him was really there, he gradually depressed the brake pedal and put the car in park. Officer Scott got out of his car and stood facing the sheep with one arm resting on the open car door. There seemed to be no one around to neither claim this animal nor provide an answer to why it was there. With a hesitant gait, Officer Scott approached the sheep with hands in pockets. Only the resonance of the officer's breathing filled the charming Milton Street that morning. The sheep didn't budge even after Officer Scott was positioned right beside it. He looked the animal in the eyes and the animal looked back. Then, with a lift of his long leg, Officer Scott straddled the sheep and took

seat on its back. Suddenly strained, the sheep let out an eerie human-like bellow. It was there, as the dawn light hit Milton Street, that Officer Scott attempted to ride the sheep like a mechanical bull in a honky-tonk bar.

"Yee-haw!" Officer Scott exclaimed, as if he were the urban cowboy.

* * *

As Rhonda closed the front gate of the Shelton Zoo, a faint yelling could be heard. The strange sound got increasingly louder. Both Rhonda and Megan were too perplexed and curious to say anything. The sound reached a deafening volume as the source of the noise passed by the entrance. Rhonda's mouth dropped like a sinking ship.

"Rhonda, was that just your brother chasing a llama?" Megan asked earnestly.

Without answering, Rhonda quickly ran through the entry and onto the street. Frank had stopped sprinting and was leaning forward with his knees bent, his hands on his thighs. No longer being chased, the llama had also taken a breather. The light claps of Rhonda's footsteps on the brick street made Frank's head perk up. His head remained facing away from Rhonda.

"I thought...I'd bring...this one...back to you," he said between gasps.

Rhonda stayed where she was standing. She pushed her auburn hair out of her eyes.

"The point was for them not to be at the zoo...the point was for...never mind," she said in a near whisper.

Frank began to snicker, turning his head to face her. His smile, so genuine and wide, displayed most of his teeth.

"I bet you blew 'em away with something real special tonight, eh kid?" he asked, his eyes glistening with tears.

But it was too late. Rhonda had vanished from the street.

* * *

Megan had left for the woods a minute earlier, not wanting to get caught up with anything involving Frank. Her father had always called him a "wacko." Plus, with the sun rising, she thought it best to get back home. Rhonda had followed Megan's path just moments later, soon catching up to her friend.

"Hey."

"Hey."

They gazed hard at one another for what seemed like ages, as if trying to read each other's minds. Rhonda finally broke the silence.

"Um, want to come over for breakfast in the morning? My, my grandpa, is um...making his waffles. Prize winning."

"I know."

They both looked down at the ground, awkwardly staring at their sneakers.

Megan raised her head and began to walk backward.

"I'll see you Monday, 'k?" she asked in a confident tone.

"See you Monday," Rhonda relied halfheartedly.

Nearby, a squirrel scurried up a tree faster than the blink of an eye.

* * *

With the tap of her shoulder, Megan awoke. Her mother was kneeling next to her bed.

"M, honey, wake up dear."

Megan was startled and considerably frightened.

"M, you awake hon?"

Megan bobbed her head up and down solemnly.

"Well, M, I'm sorry to wake you, but I need you to come with me to pick up your father. He's...he's at the police station."

Megan scratched her scalp, not thinking much of this, taking into account that her father was a police officer.

"Oh, the car break down again?" she inquired with a gurgle.

Megan's mother stared down at the beige rug and squinted like she had just tasted a lemon. She looked back at her daughter.

"No, honey. Your father's been arrested."

"Wait, what...what do you mean?" Megan implored.

With hesitation, her mother added:

"Something...something to do with a sheep."

* * *

Rhonda's grandfather was at the kitchen counter mixing flour, sugar, salt, and yeast in a glass bowl. Heat was emanating from the waffle iron situated next to the bowl. Small bits of leftover batter sizzled in its crevices. Rhonda was finishing up her first batch of waffles.

Her grandmother was sitting on a sofa across the room, noiselessly sipping from her mug of coffee, the spider veins on her legs peeking out through her bathrobe. The room was blindingly bright with sunlight, so much so that Rhonda had to keep from squinting.

"Grandpa?" she asked. "If I were on death row, and could get any meal, I'd ask for your waffles. Y'know. I'd ask for you to make them. Would they allow it?"

Rhonda's grandpa opened up the waffle iron's jaws and poured in the mixture. The batter spit and hissed in agony. He turned his head to look at Rhonda. Constant puckering gave hi the face of a lamb.

"Don't worry 'bout no death row now, Rhon. You ain't killed no one. Last meal's for those people. Killers. Those that take life from others. Or take love. Either way, death row's for bad people. Or so I've heard."

Rhonda looked out the sliding glass door. In the neighbor's yard a young Indian boy was shooting off fireworks. A mangy golden retriever ran beneath sparkling streams that marked the sky above them like pixie stick sugar.

"Yeah, but I sure like them waffles."